

The Trap of Tokenism - A Time for Soul-searching

If ritualist observance of anniversaries could usher in peace, justice and harmony, the world would be a vastly happier place to live in. The United Nations, and its affiliates, have designated particular days to champion various causes, e.g. the children and women, human rights, environment, war against HIV/AIDS. Yet with the passage of each year the problems multiply: violence against women, social unrest, sectarian conflicts and a yawning gap between rich and the poor.

This year, too, the Sikhs all over the world would celebrate the birth of Guru Gobind Singh Ji - the *Patshah-Darvesh* who dedicated his life for emancipation of the spirit of humanity. There would be day-long sessions of *Guruvani kirtan*, *langar* feasts and lectures by learned *gyanis*, as also *amrit prachar*, ushering hundreds of volunteers into the Khalsa fold. Then everyone will return to the grinding routine of coping with his or her day-to-day problems, forgetting that the Guru had struggled all his life and practised what he preached, to become *appe Guru-chela*. His life symbolised nobility and justice for the downtrodden.

Most of us are however content with minimalist tokenism. We are too engrossed to let God enter our hearts, too preoccupied to ponder the basic purpose - and the opportunity - of life on earth. Guru Granth Sahib, the Living Guru in holy scripture beckons each of us, in love, to tread the path of righteousness. Guru's Word pulsates with vitality and wisdom. The truths nestling therein wait to be grasped and imbibed, so that we realize our divine nature and potential, shed fear and become brave - in service and sacrifice - for country and humanity. To pay only lip-service on specific dates is to trivialize the moral grandeur of Guru Govind Singh Ji, who changed the course of history - not only for motherland, but for all human race.

The collapse of the Mughal empire was only the starting point of this change. Historians may continue to debate over the nature of that collapse, but it was the suffering and sacrifice of the Sikhs in the Eighteenth century India that truly paved the way for freedom. Can we ever forget martyrdom of the sons of Guru Govind Singh? Two of them died in the battle of Chamkaur, and the younger two - aged nine and seven - were bricked alive at Sirhind. Banda Singh Bahadur's four year old son, Ajay Singh too was brutally killed under Farukh Siyar's orders in Delhi's Red Fort in June 1716. Freedom invariably demands sacrifice and undying courage. Power-hungry monarchs and dynasts - past and present - look for excuses to subjugate (if not to decimate) the smaller and weaker nations. In every age, pious platitudes and sanctimonious excuses are trotted out to justify aggression. At the end, the historians argue over the "collateral damage." That is what happened to the Sikhs in 1984.

Where are Singhs gone: There is one section of post-1984 Sikhs in Punjab that is mired in unashamed consumerism. Another section seeks solace in obscurantist cults, partonizing sundry holymen whose one-point programme is self aggrandisement. We witness an increasing tribe of upwardly mobile Sikhs who seem coy in using their surname 'Singh' and are at pains to flaunt their casteist titles, thus delimiting their credentials and denying that they were inheritors of the great Gurus' legacy.

What happened in the state of Gujarat during 2002 should be a sobering lesson for all minority religions. Indifference to these recent events, particularly among community leaders, MPs and MLAs, could be an invitation to disaster. By forgetting the past we only tend to repeat history. Japan in 1994 officially apologized for the World War II atrocities. The former Soviet Union collapsed in 1990 under the weight of its repressive policies and its Siberian "Gulags" where dissidents used to be exiled. Even Saddam Hussain last month apologized for Iraq's invasion of Kuwait a decade ago. But the perpetrators of the 1984 massacre of the Sikhs are utterly remorseless and Indian Parliament remains tongue-tied. In this bizarre scenario we remember, with sober gratitude, that it was Pope John Paul II who, in distant Vatican on June 10, 1984 publicly expressed "an immediate sentiment of human pity for all the victims" as a result of army assault on the Golden Temple. The government of India was not listening then - nor remorseful now.

Wake-up to Reality: While the wounds of Operation Bluestar fester, hundreds of Sikhs remain in various prisons under the (now repealed) TADA perpetrating a colossal violation of human rights. Nor have the government traced, or accounted for, hundreds of innocent men who had been liquidated in fake encounters, and cremated clandestinely, by the police forces in Punjab during President's rule and under Beant Singh. Also forgotten are Satwant Singh and Kehar Singh who were hanged in Delhi's Tihar jail on Friday, January 6, 1989 for the alleged conspiracy to assassinate Mrs. G. in 1984. Their bodies were cremated clandestinely - much in the manner of the bodies of Shahid Bhagat Singh and his companions on March 23, 1931 during the Colonial rule. In case of Kehar Singh, the eminent lawyer, Fali S. Nariman, then India's sole representative on the Geneva based International Commission of Jurists, had telephoned the President of India, Mr. R. Venkataraman, to convey that the Commission's Secretary General had issued an appeal to President for reprieve for Kehar Singh "because the evidence against him was flimsy and purely conjectural." But the Secretary to President, one Prem Kumar, IAS, politely put off Mr. Nariman: "The President is sleeping and can not be disturbed." So an innocent life was extinguished.

In these critical times, let us return to the kernel of Guru's teachings and learn to live as Khalsa Sikhs - true to legacy, not in tokenism, but in reality.

